

Talk with Seiso Sensei May 24, 2021

Let's begin by examining the title, *Hensan*.

"Hen" means everywhere or widely and "San means to visit or to learn through experience.

Hensan has been translated as "On Seeking One's Master Far and Wide," "Thorough Exploration"

and "All-Inclusive Study." *Hensan* functions as a synonym for zazen and specifically, *shikantaza*,

the practice of just sitting with no gaining mind. Dōgen makes this clear further on in the fascicle.

He writes:

"Thorough exploration is just sitting and getting free of body and mind. The state at the present moment in which going is going there and coming is coming here, there being no gap between them, is thorough exploration with the whole body, and it is the whole body of "the great truth."

In the introduction to his translation, Hubert Nearman notes:

"Dōgen understands the term as referring to thoroughly exploring the Matter through one's own training with one's master which does not require leaving one's training place. In this sense one is seeking far and wide within oneself for the Master, which is one's true self."

Dōgen emphasizes relationships and our actions in the world, which can be based on the reaction to delusion, greed, or hate and then enacted by selfish grasping and pushing away

induced by attachment and aversion. Alternatively, we can act out of selflessness deriving

through wisdom and compassion. On this point in his introduction to *Hensan*, Nishijima writes:

"But according to Master Dōgen, Hensan, or "thorough exploration," is accomplished not by traveling around but by a Buddhist monk's thorough exploration of the Buddhist state under one true master."

This reading of Dōgen clearly emphasizes relationships, in this case with one's teacher and in terms of the "True Master Within," that is, with ourselves. Visiting various teachers was a common practice in ancient China. In fact, in some koans we read that one's teacher would

recommend that the student go see so and so. This is the case for instance in *Ikka Myoju*, "One Bright Pearl." The story begins with Gensha Shibi setting out on a visit to another monastery. But as he does so, he stubs his toe on a stone. Bleeding and in great pain, [Master Gen- sha] all at once seriously reflects as follows: "[They say] this body is not real existence. Where does the pain come from?"

Dōgen returns to this story here in *Hensan*. Now-a-days, the attitude is very different. Rather than being encouraged to visit another teacher, a contemporary teacher may discourage a student or disparage other teachers. On the other hand, there is so many teachers and teachings available these days via the internet that anyone can "visit" as many teachers as they wish. I think it's helpful to get another point of view or seek out another's expertise on a topic that they may specialize in. In fact, Soto Zen Buddhist Association encourages it within certain parameters. The important caution, however, is to be aware that we are not acting out some resistance to deeper work and going sideways as a distraction.

Dōgen opens *Hensan* by writing:

"The great truth of Buddhist patriarchs is exploration of the ultimate state through and through, is "there being no strings under the feet" and is "the appearance of clouds under the feet."

Dōgen makes reference to this point further down where he writes:

"The principle of the state of thorough exploration described here is exploration of a somersault; it is the sacred truth, at the same time, not being practiced. "How could it have grades or ranks?"

Dōgen has turned the traditional or conventional meaning of traveling on its head. That is, he relates "traveling here and there to the internal world of the student and to how this

internal world is deeply explored with the teacher and through practice. for instance, further on into his talk he writes:

"We do not esteem idly entering one monastery and leaving another monastery as thorough exploration"

In the *Menju* "Meeting Buddha Face to Face," chapter of the *Shobogenzo*, "True Dharma Eye," Dōgen uses the term *Kyūsan* for the notion of investigation. However, as Nishijima notes, the characters usually appear the other way round, in the verb phrase *sankyū suru*, "to investigate," "to master," "to investigate in practice," "to master in experience," etc. *Kyū* means to investigate thoroughly. *San* means to go, visit, enter into, participate, or devote oneself to. Master Dōgen frequently uses *san* in the compound *sangaku*, "learning in practice," to indicate that Buddhist learning is a process to which the whole body-mind is devoted; it is not merely intellectual study of theoretical principles or scientific study of objective data. That would include all phenomenon and experiences. In this regard, despite the high level of philosophical explication, this is clearly a practice-oriented document which is a consistent theme throughout his writings, despite the highly abstract and philosophical nature of many of the discourses. Dōgen speaks of taking forward and backward steps. For example, in *Ikka Myōju*, "One Bright Pearl," he notes that all forward and backward steps are taken in the Ghost Cave, in other words, in *samsara*. By forward and backward steps, he means that the backward step refers to looking within and the forward step refers to looking without.

Here is another example, again from *Menju*, "Face to Face Transmission," Dōgen writes:

Studying for a while the story of a lion mustering all its strength and speed and studying the story of a turtle trying to climb a tree upside down, you should investigate the vigorous road of stepping forward and stepping back. In succession of the Dharma, the power of learning in practice like this exists.

In *Genjokoan*, "Actualizing the Fundamental Point," Dōgen makes the famous statement that to "*study Zen is to study the self; to study the self is to drop the self and be informed by all beings.*"

Similarly, in *Ikka Myoju*, from his radical non-dualistic perspective, Dōgen writes:

Even surmising and worry is not different from the bright pearl. No action nor any thought has ever been caused by anything other than the bright pearl. Therefore, forward steps and backward steps in a demon's black-mountain cave are just the one bright pearl itself.

This consistent radical non-dualism excludes nothing as he notes later. He writes further on in *Hensan*:

"Old Master Śākyamuni and Old Man Gensha are investigating to the limit the experience of satisfaction and the experience of dissatisfaction: this is the principle of thorough exploration."

So, you see, we are not seeking preferred states of mind, such as, in this example, seeking satisfaction and ignoring or pushing away dissatisfaction. Rather, we are applying equal attention to both as they rise, transform, evolve and dissolve and we maintain a balanced outlook on all mind concepts and processes. Actually, I prefer to speak about them as "perceptual experiences" rather than as "mind states" because of their fluidity and because they are in constant motion both in terms of any one perceptual process and the associated consciousnesses how quickly or slowly thoughts, for example, evolve and transform; rise and disappear. Also, consider how quickly perceptions can shift between all of the various perceptual processes: smelling, tasting, hearing seeing, touching & thinking. We are reminded of all of these processes every time we recite the *Heart Sutra*.

As we delve into *Hensan* I plan to focus on two attitudinal and practice issues:

1- Going sideways

2-Getting side-tracked in conceptual thinking that can take the form of added on techniques.

These issues are implied in Dōgen's opening paragraph. He writes:

"The great truth of Buddhist patriarchs is exploration of the ultimate state through and through, is "there being no strings under the feet"¹ and is "the appearance of clouds under the feet."² Still, although it is like this, "the opening of flowers is the occurrence of the world,"³ and "At this concrete place, I am always keen."⁴

With these points of emphasis in mind, I see this piece as a further unpacking of Dōgen's comment from *Fukanzazengi*: "It is never apart from you, right where you are. What is the use of going off here and there to practice?" Although in a sense we do seek far and wide throughout the infinite space and timelessness of mind, which functions beyond infinite space and time. This comment can be understood in terms of behaviors in the world, such as actually visiting various teachers and monasteries to find the dharma, or as I mentioned, Dōgen emphasizes, this phrase, more importantly, as referring to internal states of mind. In this regard, can we remain present despite the many states of mind that may arise during practice? Where do you travel off to when sitting?

Let's take a closer look at these two points.

1- Going sideways or what I call "experience collecting."

We live in a paradoxical wasteland of spiritual abundance and we are free to wander through the aisles of the "spiritual supermarket" picking and choosing whatever strikes our present like, whatever appears to be amazing, the ultimate, the answer, whatever will provide the next powerful experience, but when our choices are motivated by whatever our desires are in the moment, sooner or later the so-called powerful experience that our impulses can ignite wear off, there is no resolution and we seek another powerful experience. We go sideways from

one technique to the next and never really plunge the depths of the reality of our lives. Can we stick with one practice when the excitement and novelty turn to boredom? Can we keep practicing no matter what? Can we sit in the still still state, the resolute state, in the dignified Buddha state with the relaxed decisiveness of *mushotoku*, no gaining mind fuelled by the intention of *Bodhicitta*? Can we continue to sit with "beginner's mind?" as Suzuki Roshi recommends that we strive for?

2-Getting side-tracked in conceptual thinking that can take the form of added on techniques and which is a variation of "experience collecting" as the two issues overlap.

In the koan literature, this is an example of "adding flowers to brocade." Or as Katagiri Roshi describes as adding "decorations." There is no need for either. The brocade is already complete just as it is. Just sitting with no gaining mind is already complete as it is. Why complicate or obfuscate it! What's the point? Techniques often function as novelties that may attract our attention until the interest wears off. Then we try a different technique. Breath counting, breath following, exotic visualizations, mantras, devotional prayers, a different koan. The problem is that as useful as these techniques can be, they can all saturate psychic space, intrigue us when we get bored or function as a resistance when we get anxious or feel overwhelmed. This saturation of psychic space might have the beneficial effect of inducing peace, and relaxed states of body and mind. However, they can at the same time interfere with the realizational vision derived through just sitting in choiceless awareness.

Here is a contextual point. Notice that Dōgen is explicating a Truth. That is, a Dharma Truth that places him in the position of the one who knows, the expert, the realized one and as

we will see, he places himself in the lineage of the ancestors all the way back to Buddha. Later in *Hensan*, he talks about how the mind of practice and realization is no different than Buddha's mind; no different than Bodhidharma's mind. He describes this in terms of Gensha and Seppo, who he wrote about in detail in *Ikka Myoju, One Bright Pearl* that he wrote in 1238 and returns to in *Hensan*, written in 1243. He writes:

Gensha preaches to the assembly, "I and Old Master Śākyamuni have experienced the same state."³¹ Then a monk steps forward and asks, "I wonder what person you met." The master says, "The third son of the Sha family, on a fishing boat."³²

That is, he met himself. This is a common theme, for example, in his radical reinterpretation of the Tile Polishing story, that he discusses in *Kokyo*, "Ancient Mirror," Dōgen writes:

"...when the polishing of the tile becomes a mirror, Ma-tsu makes a Buddha; and when Ma-tsu makes a Buddha, Ma-tsu quickly becomes Ma-tsu. When Ma-tsu becomes Ma-tsu, zazen quickly becomes zazen"

Dōgen continues his commentary in *Hensan*:

The head-to-tail rightness experienced by "Old Master Śākyamuni" is naturally the same as the experience of Old Master Śākyamuni himself. And because the head-to-tail rightness experienced by Old Man Gensha is naturally the same as the experience of Old Man Gensha himself, Old Master Śākyamuni and Old Man Gensha are experiencing the same state. Old Master Śākyamuni and Old Man Gensha are investigating to the limit the experience of satisfaction and the experience of dissatisfaction:

This neutral non-grasping, non-judgmental all-inclusive choiceless, goalless and objectless awareness is the practice of *shikantaza*. Just sitting with equanimity whether in satisfaction or dissatisfaction this is the principle of thorough exploration. Because Old Master Śākyamuni experiences the same state as Old Man Gensha, and by proxy, the

same state as Zen Master Dōgen and by further extension, the same state that we experience.

Dōgen continues further on:

Gensha, he is the eternal buddha. Because Old Man Gensha is in the same state as Old Master Śākyamuni, he is a descendant. We should thoroughly explore this truth, in detail.

There are a couple of ways to understand this quote. First, Dōgen advocates an egalitarian and non-dualistic position that is critical of levels of attainment or practice and he reinforces the teaching of *mushotoku*, "no gaining mind" that is, that we are not seeking to attain anything that is separate from where we are right now. However, from an historical and contextual perspective, Dōgen is by proxy, that is, by quoting an old *mondo* (question and answer dialog) between Gensha and his teacher Seppo, he is placing himself in the orthodox lineage of ancestors going back to the historical Buddha and positioning himself as the authority. This historical point is important because he was not recognized or authorized by the Japanese government as a religious teacher even though he had benefactors and followers. This became an issue especially when many former Daruma Sect monks began to join and follow him. The Daruma sect was considered heretical and outlawed by the government. It was at this point that Dōgen and his small group of followers were literally burned out of their temple and, by some accounts, basically run out of Kyoto. It was at this time, that he established Eiheiiji in Echizen province, a rural area, a distance from Kyoto.

Returning to this opening statement, Dōgen makes three abstract statements, a concrete comment, and a practice point:

- *exploration of the ultimate state through and through,*
- *"there being no strings under the feet"*

- *"the appearance of clouds under the feet."*
- *"the opening of flowers is the occurrence of the world,"³*
- *"At this concrete place, I am always keen."*

Note that he opens *Genjokoan*, "Actualizing the Fundamental Point," in a similar way. That is, he offers an abstract philosophical or doctrinal statement, then proceeds to his view and finally offers a concrete and lived example, often through his commentary on a koan. For instance, he opens *Genjokoan* as follows:

- *When all dharmas are [seen as] the Buddha-Dharma, then there is delusion and realization, there is practice, there is life and there is death, there are buddhas and there are ordinary beings.*
- **[This is the cause-and-effect model of early Buddhism].**
- *When the myriad dharmas are each not of the self, there is no delusion and no realization, no buddhas and no ordinary beings, no life and no death.*
- **[This is the emptiness model of the Middle-way developed by Nagarjuna].**
- The Buddha's truth is originally transcendent over abundance and scarcity, and so there is life and death, there is delusion and realization, there are beings and buddhas.
- **[This is Dōgen's non-dualistic and all-inclusive understanding].**
- And though it is like this, it is only that flowers, while loved, fall; and weeds while hated, flourish. **[This is a concrete lived human example].**

Let's take each of the lines in the opening statement of *Hensan* in turn:

"exploration of the ultimate state through and through"

"The ultimate state:" What is reality, often described as *Immo* or suchness, being-as-it-is or *"What is it that thus comes?"* What is the thorough exploration of the ultimate state?"

We could say that this is *shusho*, practice realization or practice verification. That is, as we sit, we are actualizing the ultimate state in the very act of practice. We could say that Dōgen's explication begins with an exhortation to practice. The emphasis here is on what we do. How do we practice?

"there being no strings under the feet"

You've heard the expression "no strings attached." Of course, you know that it doesn't refer to literal strings. The expression alludes to the notion of no complications, nothing extra owed or required; nothing binding to tie one down. You are basically unfettered, nothing holding you back, free as a bird. This image, free as a bird, is the source of this expression, "no strings under the feet." In ancient China, the practice to tie strings around the feet of birds was intended to hold them captive, to prevent them from flying off. Dōgen is opening this fascicle with the offer of freedom at our fingertips, ". . . there being no strings under the feet." However, psychic or emotional strings can be deeply and powerfully binding and restricting. What binds us contributes to a solidified and self-limiting sense of self and creates the illusion of a fixed point when in reality there is no fixed point. Often, an individual's actions and intentions don't match their internal sense of self-experience. For example, a person considers oneself as "selfish" internally, which then forms the content of their thinking processes. However, does the individual act on these thoughts which are unreal, but could have very real consequences if they are taken as real and acted out in the world, or does the person take the backward step and in reality, responds to situations with well-intentioned acts of compassion and selflessness or

generosity. Our beliefs, dogmas and various internal states contribute to these limitations, which can feel safe and anchoring, yet also frustrating. "That's not me." "I can't do that." What ties us up? Fear, hate, envy; a complex toxic cocktail of all of these elements in varying degrees; a limited self-view? A view clogged up with old unconscious trans-generational internalizations? Thoughts, feelings, memories, fantasies that combine and become solidified as *samskaras*, habit formations that engender a solidified sense of self and become enacted in repetitive behaviors? Such mental productions and contents and processes can pre-occupy the practitioner and function as anchors and resistances. Dōgen says that these states of mind all require "thorough exploration." Dōgen is telling us that the key to what he describes here as "the ultimate state through and through is thorough exploration" by which he means just sitting in *shikantaza*. Yes, "no strings under the feet" implies freedom. From a practice perspective, this implies just sitting and not being limited by practices that are tied to complicated or restricting techniques or imagined outcomes or goals. We maintain, "no strings attached" through a choiceless goalless objectless awareness of just sitting free from gaining mind. We begin to see through the fluidity and transparency of our internal processes and the illusion of a limited, isolated and permanent sense of self. Dōgen makes reference to this point further down where he writes:

"The principle of the state of thorough exploration described here is exploration of a somersault; it is the sacred truth, at the same time, not being practiced. "How could it have grades or ranks?"

Somersault serves as an image of being free and flexible, open to all experience. In terms of mind, somersault refers to freedom of mind when not limited by or stuck in pre-conceived and solidified notions that can be self-limiting such as when one might say, "That's not me, I

could never do that!" This is the freedom of being able to take the backward step and become open to the reality of the moment.

He has turned the traditional or conventional meaning on its head. That is, he relates "traveling here and there" to the internal world of the student and to how this internal world is deeply explored with the teacher and through practice. For instance, further on into his talk he writes: *"We do not esteem idly entering one monastery and leaving another monastery as thorough exploration"*

"the appearance of clouds under the feet."

The image of "clouds appearing under our feet" implies something mystical or magical. Zazen is not about obtaining mystical powers; not about illusions of other worldliness; not about transcendence to other dimensions or realms. Suzuki Roshi was an incredible Dōgen transmitter. Dōgen seeps through all of his teachings.

He exemplifies internalizing the Dharma and speaking it from our own voices and I would add, our everyday actions.

This piece from *Zen Mind Beginner's Mind* captures the essence of Dōgen's Hensan:

"Zen is not some kind of excitement, but concentration on our usual everyday routine."

Transcendence in this context refers to transcending self-oriented, self-preoccupied and self-limiting and solidified illusions of self and realizing the Truth of Being. You have heard the expression "head in the clouds," "not having one's feet on the ground." You have probably experienced being preoccupied with something, with the mind elsewhere, and not feeling present. There is nothing magical about zazen; just basic down to earth unfettered sitting practice; thoroughly exploring or investigating the concrete reality of now, just sitting, basic fact

of sitting. However, he is saying that even such mystical states when they occur, that is, the clouds under the feet, also require thorough investigation without grasping or rejecting.

"the opening of flowers is the occurrence of the world"

This is reality. *How do we deal with it?* Dōgen offers this advice:

"Unless the truth of thorough exploration is actually manifest in the present, experience of the self is impossible and experience of the self is unsatisfactory; experience of others is impossible, and experience of others is unsatisfactory; experience of "a person" is impossible, experience of "I" is impossible, experience of a fist is impossible, and experience of the eye is impossible—lifting the self by fishing the self is impossible, and rising up even before being fished is impossible. When thorough exploration is perfectly realized already, it is free of "thorough exploration" (Nishijima & Cross, p. 211).

"At this concrete place, I am always keen."

So, Dōgen is not tied up, not up in the clouds. He is down to earth; as he says, "in the concrete place"; something that he is "always keen about." He is eager, interested, and enthusiastic and he wants us to be too. This sense of the word keen refers to exactly what is his particular interest, as in he's very keen on the concrete place of just sitting free from encumbrances of any kind including techniques, preconceptions or goals. About this he is "keen" sharp, intense, and strong.

Dōgen then quotes Nyojo Tendo, his teacher:

*The great truth is gateless.
It springs out beyond your brains.
As space, it transcends any path.
[Yet] it has already got inside the nostrils of Seiryō.
Meeting with it like this would be inimical to imitators of Gautama,
And a womb of trouble for those of Rinzai.
Aye. . .
A great master tumbles, dancing in the spring breeze.
Falling in amazement, apricot blossoms scatter a riot of crimson. (p. 279).*

I'll end with Dōgen's comment on this poem, which emphasizes practice and the experiential intuited wisdom that emerges when we are practicing.

In "springing out" of such places with the whole body, we employ no methods other than "springing out beyond the brain" and "getting inside the nostrils." Both are learning in practice. [AND] Those who have never experienced springing free beyond the brain and never experienced transformation of the body inside the nostrils are not people of learning in practice and are not men of thorough exploration."